

## PHULKARI BAGHS OF THE PUNJAB: ANOTHER PERSPECTIVE

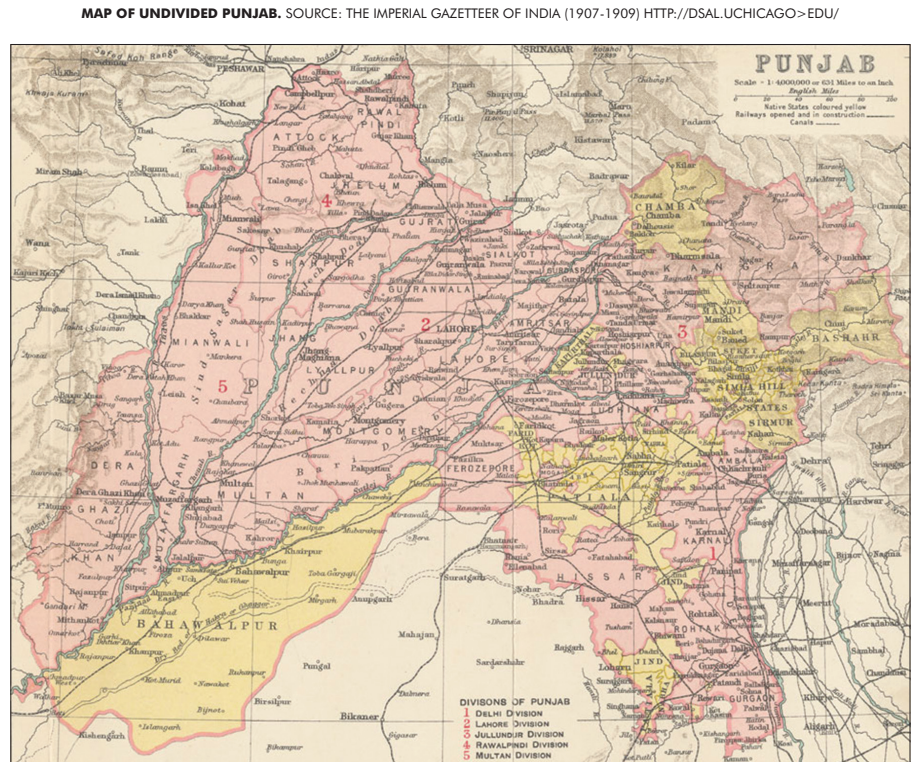
Arjmand Aziz

Although the most recognised of South Asian embroidery there is curiously little scholarship available about the deeper meanings of *phulkari chadars* or shawls. *Phulkari*, literally translated as ‘flower’ (*phul*) and ‘work’ (*kari*), is used to describe several different styles of cloths historically made in the region of Punjab that today comprise the states of Punjab, Haryana, Himachal Pradesh in northern India, and the Punjab province of Pakistan including parts of Swat and Hazara. Within the hierarchy of *phulkaris*, *baghs* (literally ‘gardens’) were the most prestigious and precious.

Created over many years to become family heirlooms, *baghs* were embroidered in silk floss covering the entire base *khaddar* (cotton) material. They were created by women within their own families, for wearing and presenting on auspicious religious occasions and as markers of significant life events such as marriages and births. Made by Hindu, Sikh and Muslim women they were never intended to be made or sold for a market or gifted to outsiders. The holding aloft of a *bagh* above a bride as she made her way to the marriage *mandap*, or the draping of a *bagh* upon her as she entered her new home, marked and commemorated significant events both spatially and symbolically.

*Baghs* are often only analysed in terms of colours, stitches and shapes of motifs (Crill 1999). For Western art historians, they fall neither into the category of elite, imperial textiles nor can they be categorised as tribal embroidery. Further, much scholarship has used a reductive ‘Pakistan-India’ lens (McKnight Sethi in Mason 2016: 13) which focuses upon bifurcating the analysis between supposed ‘Islamic’ (ie geometric/non-figural) embroidery and ‘Hindu’ (ie figural/anthropomorphic) motifs, thereby separating the *baghs* geographically (Berinstain 1991:10). This lens is often chosen despite significant evidence from British colonial records indicating *baghs* were made from Hazara to Ludhiana and Jhelum to Ambala, stretching across pre-1947 borders (Hitkari 1980: 8, 14).

Rather than viewing *baghs* through the prism of rural nostalgia, a supposed Muslim-Hindu divide, broad notions of ‘fertility’ or urban projections of ‘folk’ traditions, I suggest that a deep observation of nature and seasonal cycles is embedded within the geometric grid



of the embroidered fabric. More specifically, I propose *baghs* should be seen as conceptual maps of ancestral land, daily and seasonal interaction with it and the social relationships which are renewed and sustained by this interaction.

The evidence to support this hypothesis lies literally in the fields. To demonstrate this I will examine two ceremonial wedding *baghs*, the specific colours used within the main fields as well as the narrow borders and suggest the combinations are neither random nor purely aesthetic – but have cogent and clear links with how agricultural land is used.

The Punjab has historically been and is still the source of incredible agricultural wealth. The river Indus and its five tributaries as well as the Delhi doab, provide rich, alluvial plains for the growing of much of the subcontinent’s staple foods. Cotton from the Punjab provides the fibre from which strong but supple *khaddar* fabric is made for the creation of *phulkaris*.

Until the introduction of mechanised spinning and weaving technology by colonial powers, cotton was hand spun on *charkhas* (spinning wheels) at home by women. The cotton thread would then be taken to the village weaver (*julaha*) to be woven into narrow strips no wider than 70 cm. Three (sometimes four)

narrow strips were sewn together to form one rectangular piece. Sometimes the strips were sewn together after embroidering or the embroidery only commenced once the strips had been joined together.

The hand spun and handwoven *khaddar* was then either dyed by the village dyer (*lalari*) or at home using natural indigenous madder (*rubia tinctoria*) which produces various shades of red, brown and maroon. The silk thread used to create the spectacular, shimmering embroidery was untwisted floss silk (*pat* or *heer*). Untwisted fibres, although susceptible to breakage and pilling, have a high gloss and can, if manipulated with dexterity, lie flat across the surface of the *khaddar* to create a remarkably shiny surface. The silk came by caravan from Afghanistan, Kashmir, Bengal and China to Dera Ghazi Khan where it was dyed and then dispersed through travelling middlemen and regional shopkeepers.

The *bravura* embroidery itself is a modified, relatively simple darning stitch interspersed with several other stitches in a minor role. Most importantly, the stitch is done almost completely from the reverse of the cloth. Each stitch is painstakingly counted along the warp and weft of the *khaddar* to create the design on the right side of the fabric. Any tiny mistake, therefore, skews the overall balance



**BAGH (FULL SIZE)**, UNDIVIDED PUNJAB, RAWALPINDI (MODERN DAY PAKISTAN), EARLY 20TH CENTURY, UNTWISTED SILK FLOSS EMBROIDERY ON MAROON KHADDAR BASE, 120 X 243CM. © JOSS GRAHAM GALLERY, LONDON. PHOTO: AUTHOR



and proportion of the grid. Thus, precision, discipline and keen concentration was necessary to create the designs within tightly demarcated borders.

Done without a frame, seated, usually with one leg tucked underneath her, the embroiderer would fill the rectangular field within square or triangular grids. In the case of *baghs*, the embroidery took many months, often years. The right side of the fabric was covered with muslin or a thinner cotton cloth to protect it from dirt and dust.

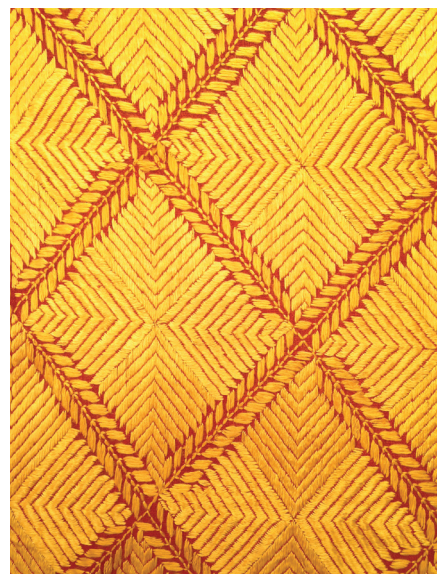
Mothers taught their daughters how to embroider *phulkaris* from a young age, first giving them cheaper, indigo coloured *khaddar* and cotton thread to practise with. Motifs and designs were also passed on from mother to daughter, though each woman and family would develop individual styles within

the broader favoured repertoire of styles (Bhandari in Tillotson 2014: 135).

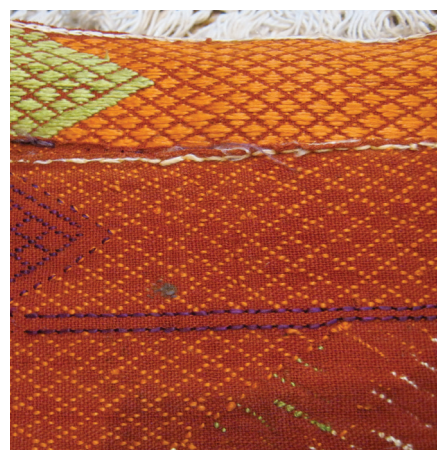
Once adept at basic techniques, a girl would begin embroidering a *bagh* for her wedding trousseau. This was done on an auspicious base colour such as reddish-brown or maroon. The design was marked out in herringbone stitch in cotton thread before darning stitch was used to fill in the outline field. When a grandchild was born, after the distribution of gifts and sweets and the culmination of special prayers for the new born, the grandmother would commence making a *bagh* for the future marriage of the child.

In the case of a girl, it would be held above her head by her maternal uncles as she made her way to the marriage *mandap*. As such it was a repository of the family's love for their child as well as a symbol of their status, wealth,

**BAGH (DETAIL)**, UNDIVIDED PUNJAB, RAWALPINDI (MODERN DAY PAKISTAN), EARLY 20TH CENTURY, UNTWISTED SILK FLOSS EMBROIDERY ON MAROON KHADDAR BASE. © JOSS GRAHAM GALLERY, LONDON. PHOTO: AUTHOR



**VARI DA BAGH (DETAIL)**, UNDIVIDED PUNJAB C 1925, UNTWISTED SILK FLOSS EMBROIDERY ON TOBACCO BROWN KHADDAR BASE SHOWING COUNTED DARNING STITCH TECHNIQUE ON THE REVERSE ALONGSIDE BORDER RIGHT SIDE UP, 120 X 243CM. © JOSS GRAHAM GALLERY, LONDON. PHOTO: AUTHOR



honour and prestige. A dazzling resonance of colour, therefore, framed the bride as she entered the most important and auspicious moment of her life. It would accompany her to her new home and become part of her future daughter's inheritance.

In the case of a grandson, the grandmother would begin making a *vari da bagh* (plural: *vari de bagh*) to drape over the shoulders of his future wife when she first entered her new home. In this capacity, the *bagh* symbolised the inheritance she was now a part of and would help to continue. Such *baghs*, made for important occasions, were sometimes created with a deliberate flaw (called *nazar buttas*) to avert the evil eye. For example, sometimes a border was deliberately skewed or a small blue or black square was inserted to mar the overall splendour of the surface embroidery.



**BAGH (DETAIL),** UNDIVIDED PUNJAB C 1920, UNTWISTED SILK FLOSS EMBROIDERY ON DARK RED KHADDAR BASE SHOWING DELIBERATE FLAW ALONG THE BORDER (NAZAR BUTTA), 120 X 243CM.  
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Most of the *baghs* in museum collections are made with either one or sometimes just three colours – golden yellow, white and russet orange – on a red, brown or maroon base. I propose that these colours represent ancestral land at its most potent and auspicious.

For example, the two most important crops sown in winter in the Punjab are wheat and barley. Both are sown together and barley is often sown either in adjacent fields to wheat or in a separate sector of the main field. When young, both look the same. However, when mature, wheat takes on a yellow hue and barley grows a few inches taller and is whiter in colour. Harvesting and threshing the wheat and barley fields releases a fine dust into the air which also gives the atmosphere a golden hue. The harvest season with its overwhelming colours of yellow, golden and white as well as the golden dust in the air is made more aesthetically intense by the heavy stalks of wheat and barley blowing in the wind creating a moving interplay of light and shadowed surfaces.

It is this movement of barley and wheat, just before harvesting, I suggest, which is captured so brilliantly by the Punjabi embroiderer in the *bagh*. Here we see, in shades of intense yellow, the fields of mature wheat from ancestral lands stitched across the entire surface of *khaddar*, each grid glinting and moving in the light. Similarly, on another ceremonial *bagh*, often described as a *Moon bagh*, the maroon *khaddar* base is covered in circular clusters of stylised white barley grains. The clever method of embroidering in vertical and horizontal strips within the grid creates the visual sensation of glimmering fields of barley in moonlight.

The borders of *baghs*, particularly *vari de bagh*, reveal daily usage of ancestral land in social and religious contexts. Most literature gives little information on the borders of *vari de bagh* other than to say the colours used in borders

**MOON BAGH (DETAIL),** UNDIVIDED PUNJAB, LAHORE (MODERN DAY PAKISTAN) C 1930'S, UNTWISTED SILK FLOSS EMBROIDERY ON MAROON KHADDAR BASE, 120 X 243CM.  
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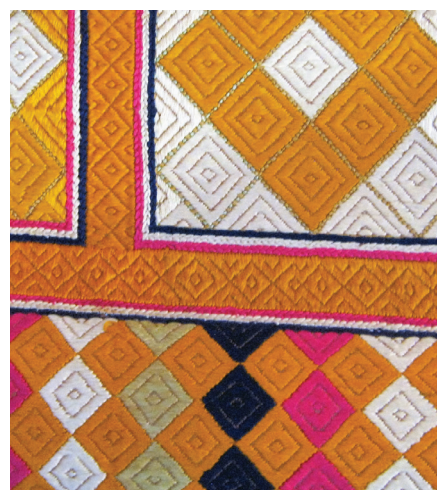
are 'complimentary to the main field' and the 'preferred' colour combinations (Crill in Stronge 1999: 133). However, the combination of pink, purple, light green, orange and white in diamond shapes or squares along the edges of borders is a recurring pattern.

I suggest the answer to this question lies, once more, in the fields. Or, more specifically, in the peripheral strips of land surrounding main crops such as wheat and barley. These strips of land are often used to grow a variety of vegetables, pulses and flowers which are harvested and used with greater frequency than main crops. Plants such as chickpeas, legumes and aubergines provide a vital part of daily meals, particularly for a population that is largely vegetarian.

In addition to one's daily needs, however, and after offering morning prayers, some excess vegetables and produce is traditionally taken to the temple, gurdwara, mosque or sufi shrine to be prepared in the *langur*. The *langur* is a community kitchen, most often associated with Sikhism, attached to the gurdwara and devoted to the communal feeding of the poor. It forms an important part of Sikhism but also exists within temple, mosque and sufi shrine complexes.

However, it is not only produce that is distributed to religious centres for charitable feeding of the poor but also flowers. In particular, marigolds, pink or red roses and jasmine are favoured as part of ritual offerings to the gods. Flowers are also necessary for the adornment of people and buildings for auspicious occasions such as births and marriages. The daily offering of flowers, often in the form of garlands in religious settings, is a hugely important part of worship across the subcontinent. In a Hindu context, to offer the god unblemished, fresh and fragrant flowers is an important part of *puja*. Similarly, roses and jasmine are grown all year round and were sold on a near-daily basis by Punjabi

**VARI DA BAGH (DETAIL),** UNDIVIDED PUNJAB C. 1925, UNTWISTED SILK FLOSS EMBROIDERY ON TOBACCO BROWN KHADDAR BASE, SHOWING BORDER WITH SQUARE LOZENGE MOTIFS IN DARK PURPLE, LIGHT GREEN, WHITE, PINK AND ORANGE, 120 X 243CM.  
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women to local shopkeepers who would then sell them in nearby regional towns.

Viewed from this perspective, the colours chosen on the borders of *vari de bagh* reflect the most important produce for daily use, private worship and redistribution to both religious and commercial networks: dark purple (aubergine), white (jasmine), pink (roses), orange (marigolds) and light green (chickpeas and legumes). These colours then find their way from the periphery of wheat and barley fields to the peripheries of magnificent *vari de bagh*.

Further research is required on the deeper meanings of *phulkaris* generally. Within the hierarchy of *phulkaris*, *baghs* continue to be sought-after pieces in private collections in the West. However, the trauma of Partition and the vast economic changes in rural Punjab that began even prior to 1947, have made this *tour-de-force* art form obsolete. Some Punjabi families retain one or two precious *baghs* as heirlooms but the painstaking embroidery itself is no longer undertaken within families.

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